

Students protest the promotion of religious fundamentalism in West Virginia public school

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On Wednesday, several hundred students held a protest against a compulsory religious revivalist program hosted at a high school in Huntington, West Virginia. At least 150 Huntington High School students walked out after a religious student group hosted Nik Walker Ministries, a Christian fundamentalist church group, at a student assembly.

While the event was said to be optional to the student body, several classrooms were told this event was mandatory. Students were then crowded into an auditorium where they were “told to close their eyes, raise their arms in prayer and give their lives to Jesus Christ,” according to an article in Truthout.

Bethany Cooper-Felinton, a Huntington parent and educator, explained what had occurred, speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Two classes were mandated to go and the rest were ‘voluntary,’” she said. “‘Voluntary’ or not, this should never have been on school grounds, It was a full-on sermon—hell and damnation.”

Cooper-Felinton’s son, Sam, was forced to attend the Christian religious event even though he is Jewish. He “texted my husband and myself about the revival and asked if this was legal,” she said. He was reportedly told by his teacher that he could not leave the event.

“We are a blended-faith family. I’ve always been very proud of that. We’ve worked very hard to raise our family and give our children every opportunity to learn,” said Felinton to the WSWS. “It’s why we go to public school, to learn to tolerate all walks of life.”

Sophie, a junior, told the WSWS that several of her friends had also been forced to attend. “It made kids very uncomfortable,” she said, noting that there were students from many backgrounds in the two classes,

including Muslim and Jewish students.

“I want to be very clear: this was not a protest against Christianity. I am the lead singer of Christian band that travels throughout the area. This protest was about defending our right to the separation of church and state.”

Sophie watched a recording from one of her friends of the event. “I was disgusted,” she said. “The speakers were saying that if you are not Christian and you die, you will spend eternity in hell. If you don’t accept Jesus then you are going straight to hell.”

“It’s heartbreaking. We all have had a hard past couple years,” she added. “I can’t imagine what it would feel like if I was forced to go there and told over and over again how I needed to be saved. I think it’s hypocritical for the speaker to say something like that as a Christian.”

The event was held during a “non-instructional” period known as COMPASS, in which students are encouraged to use the time for study. “If a revivalist Christian sermon can be held for students, we claim the absolute ability to protest the violation of our rights that accompanied this sermon during the same ... period,” reads a letter sent to the Cabell County Board of Education by Huntington senior Max Nibert, a leader of the protest on Wednesday.

Nibert and other students gathered outside of school holding signs that read, “My rights are non-negotiable,” “Separate the church and state” and other slogans. According to Nibert, there were “150–200” students in attendance.

Despite this large turnout, the students’ protests “fell on deaf ears,” he said. “Several principals supervised our protest; their unaffected nature was palpable and

when given the opportunity to address the student body, they declined.”

The students have launched a petition calling for the county board to “take further action” regarding the incident.

“It seems to me like the official line is trying to pass the buck on to these two teachers and really scapegoat them,” said parent Jana Tigchelaar in a comment to Truthout. “They shouldn’t have done what they did, but the event should never have happened at all up at the high school during the school day.”

“They can’t just play this game of, you know, ‘We’re going to choose this time as wiggle room, this gray area where we believe we can insert a church service,’” stated Herman Mays, a parent, to the Associated Press. Mays’ son Cameron had also been at the event.

A letter sent from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other organizations defending the separation of church and state to the Cabell County School District declared it was “inappropriate and unconstitutional for the District to offer religious leaders unique access to preach and proselytize students during school hours on school property.”

Walker, the evangelical minister, was invited by Future Christian Athletes (FCA), a student group at the school. The evangelical minister bragged that his ministry doesn’t “even have to knock on the door” of public establishments, but is invited in by parishioners who attend the schools.

“When you see regions like this, then you really know they need the Lord,” he claimed, referring to the social devastation which has impacted the region after years of deindustrialization and falling living standards.

The struggle to defend jobs and living conditions in an economically blighted area like Huntington is inseparable from the fight to defend democratic rights, such as the separation of church and state. In a subsequent posting on social media, the leaders of the student protests implicitly note this. “There are the deep-rooted issues that we all understand [involved in this protest],” states Max.

The student singles out “coal plummeting in supply and demand, rampant, heartbreaking opioid addiction, rapid population decline, environmental concerns stemming from West Virginia’s dependency on our natural resources, [and] our public employees being

treated unfairly by the establishment.”

The Huntington region has seen important workers struggles recently. A strike of 450 metal workers at Special Metals has been ongoing since October against plans to raise their health care premiums by over 350 percent. A strike of 900 hospital workers at Cabell-Huntington Hospital ended in December when the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) agreed to an increase in health care costs for the workers.

The attack on public education and educators in particular provoked some of the most explosive class struggles in the past decade. West Virginia educators went on strike throughout the state in 2018 and 2019 against efforts to curtail public education.

The defense of democratic rights is critical for the entire working class, and the Huntington students must be defended. All students who wish to support and expand this struggle should contact the IYSSE.



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